DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 010 HE 016 788

TITLE College Admissions and the Transition to Postsecondary Education. Briefing Package. (Public Hearing, Chicago, Illinois, June 23, 1982).

INSTITUTION National Commission on Excellence in Education (ED), Washington, DC.

PUB DATE 10 Jun 82

NOTE 0p.; For related documents, see ED 227 094, HE 016 789-808, HE 016 814, and HE 016 887.

PUB TYPE Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Academic Advising; *Admission Criteria; Advanced Placement Programs; *Articulation (Education); *College Admission; *College Bound Students; *College School Cooperation; Declining Enrollment; Economic Climate; Educationally Disadvantaged; Financial Problems; Hearings; High Risk Students; Majors (Students); Parent Student Relationship; Postsecondary Education; Student College Relationship; *Student Development

IDENTIFIERS *Excellence; National Commission on Excellence in Education

ABSTRACT

The role of college admissions standards in promoting excellence in American education and the role of colleges and high schools in helping students make the transition to postsecondary education were topics of a 1982 public hearing. Concerns of the hearing included: the relationship of admissions standards to declining enrollments and to declining financial resources; the roles of parents and advisers in the transition of students to postsecondary education, student adaptation to postsecondary education, and the relationship between high school and college curricula. The following approaches that may help promote the transition to postsecondary education were addressed: modes to condense studies, including advanced placement and time-shortened degrees; programs that bring high school students to campus for a combination of academic work, career exposure, and social activities; arrangements for sending college students and/or faculty to high schools on a regular basis for both academic and advisement purposes; offering high school students college courses that are taught by high school teachers; pre- and post-matriculation programs that address academic and personal development of college freshmen; and programs that serve underprepared students. (SW)

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20208

June 10, 1982

# COLLEGE ADMISSIONS AND THE TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

## BRIEFING PACKAGE

for Public Hearing in Chicago, Ill. on June 23, 1982

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## Overview

One of the views commonly expressed in the drive for excellence in American education is that college admissions standards and practices set the tone for student motivation and academic achievement in high school, and that those standards function as expectations toward which the entire educational system is oriented.

Changes in the nature and extent of higher education in the United States over the past quarter century have rendered this relationship far more problematic than was the case in the past and have set the whole issue in a series of more complex frameworks.

Since 1950, the number of colleges and universities in the United States has grown by more than 60% and enrollment has increased nearly 600%. Equally as weighty changes have taken place in the diversity of types of institutions, the diversity of the student body, and the diversity of enrollment patterns. Preliminary data on college and university enrollments for the Fall Semester of 1981, for example, indicate that a majority of today's college students are women, that roughly one-third are adults over the age of 25, and that over 40% are attending college on a part-time basis.

The expansion and diversification of the American higher education system can be attributed to a variety of factors: the increasing demands of the economy for a more highly-educated labor force, the demographic effects of the post-World War II baby boom, increasing specialization in all aspects of American life, and the drive to promote equal educational opportunities for a greater proportion of the population, to cite the most significant.

Recent trends have cast a cloud of ambiguity over the relationship between secondary and postsecondary education. The effects of the baby boom have passed and enrollments everywhere are shrinking. Federal and state financial support for higher education has declined measurably in constant dollars. The percentage of high school seniors going to college has levelled off, and, in fact, started to fall. Student perception of the relationship between level of education and employability has significantly shifted, and an increasing number of employers are now offering postsecondary education programs of their own.

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Due to personnel cutbacks, the system of advisement and counseling for students in both high school and college has deteriorated. College admissions tests have been attacked at the same time that high school grades appear to have undergone considerable inflation. Many states have introduced minimum competency tests as criteria for high school graduation and many colleges have accepted credit by examination using other tests. And the relatively high attrition rates among college students in the more academically demanding programs have drawn attention to the lack of cooperation between high schools and colleges in preparing students realistically for the transition from secondary to postsecondary education.

Indeed, what many educators have learned over the past quarter century of shifting trends is that

- the boundaries between secondary and postsecondary education are not as rigid as had previously been assumed;
- college admissions is but one step in a far more complex process of transition that begins with high school counseling and ends with college persistence (if, indeed, the process ever ends);
- issues of student development are far more important to the transition process than we once thought;
- "admissions" per se is now part of the strategic planning of colleges and is likely to be driven more by organizational factors than by abstract standards (e.g., many college administrators now speak of "enrollments" and "enrollment mixes" instead of "admissions");
- the demands of local economies and local population groups are powerful forces in the shaping of admissions policy.

To many observers, college-going in the eighties has become more of an economic decision of students-as-consumers than an academic decision of colleges-as-providers.

Issues to be Explored

The hearing on college admissions and the transition to postsecondary education is designed to probe this very complex set of factors and trends, to explore the potential of college admissions standards in the promotion of excellence, and to understand what colleges and high schools can do to improve the transition for those students who choose to attend college in the future. Outlined below are some of the issues which are expected to be addressed at the hearing.

## ADMISSIONS STANDARDS AND DECLINING ENROLLMENTS

It has often been noted that only the 50-60 most highly selective of America's 3,200 colleges, universities, and community colleges will be insulated from the impact of declining enrollments in the 1980s. For the rest of these institutions, in which the vast majority of college students enroll, the desire to raise admissions standards often conflicts with the realities of

formula funding, the necessity of recruitment, the maintenance of programs, and in some cases, institutional survival itself. In light of this tension, the following issues might be considered:

1) Recognizing current demographic trends, will colleges recruit more adult and foreign students than they do now? How will they go about the recruitment? Will admissions practices for these student groups change?

2) In some colleges' recruitment literature, claims are made about the nature and quality of programs offered. What happens if students discover that the reality is less than the claim? How can colleges provide more accurate "educational warranties," so to speak?

3) Are college admissions standards or college graduation standards more critical for maintaining quality in higher education?

4) How does a college faculty's demand for students who will major in specific disciplines currently influence admissions practices? Under what circumstances does "enrollment mix" become a powerful influence on admissions policy?

5) How do the demands of various constituencies of a college (alumni, legislators, etc.) for students with specific non-academic abilities (e.g., athletics) influence not only admissions practices but retention practices as well?

## ADMISSIONS STANDARDS AND DECLINING FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The financial base for higher education has been eroding for some years. With the shift in public policy from institutional assistance to student financial aid in the early 1970s, the finances of colleges and universities became more dependent on enrollments, and students' decisions on where to attend college took on more of the characteristics of financial market place decisions. In view of these factors, the following issues should arise at the hearing:

1) To what extent will reductions in present levels of student financial aid result in alterations of admissions practices? To what extent have admissions officers begun to consider ability to pay as a criterion?

2) To what extent does the portability of state financial aid influence both student choice and admissions practices?

3) Has the composition of pools of applicants to college changed as prices for higher education have risen?

## ADMISSIONS STANDARDS: TESTING, COURSEWORK AND GRADES

It has been consistently demonstrated that high school grade point averages and class standing, not test scores, are the strongest predictors of

success in college. However, a number of questions about this issue remain, and are expected to be addressed at the hearing, including:

1) As a consequence of grade inflation over the past decade, have test scores become better predictors of college performance than grades or class rank? Is there any distinction between "aptitude" and achievement tests in this regard? Is there any chance that colleges will turn more to achievement tests, if for no other reason than to check the reliability of high school grades?

2) Some researchers have pointed out that grades and tests together provide a better prediction of success than either one taken separately. Have combined indices or weightings been developed and applied in admissions practices? What have been the results?

3) A number of colleges and state systems have raised academic standards in terms of the number of courses in specific subject areas that students must complete. Some critics contend that simply raising the number of courses does not raise standards since there is no measure of subject mastery in that method. Is time on a subject or attainment in a subject the better criterion of performance for purposes of college admissions?

4) Do any of the examinations used by entering college students to earn college credits--the College Level Examination Program, the Advanced Placement Program, the International Baccalaureate, and others--stand out as true indicators of a student's mastery of college-level material?

5) Entrance examinations for high school, not college, have occasionally been proposed: not to screen students out, but to regulate their progress more closely, to discover talent, and to advise them more effectively. In some versions of this scheme, compensatory education courses taken after the 9th grade would not count toward the diploma. Assuming such a system were adopted by a local school district or state, what would be the consequences for students, parents, teachers, college admissions and college curriculum?

THE TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: PARENTAL ROLES

While the trend toward delayed entry into college has accelerated in recent years and while the proportion of adults in American colleges and universities has increased dramatically, the traditional 18-24 age group still comprises a majority of full-time college students. For that age group, parents may still have a significant influence on college attendance and courses of study. The following issues concerning this topic are expected to be discussed at the hearing:

1) What roles do parents play in selecting courses of study for their children as they enter college? Are students more or less autonomous now in selecting their courses and majors than they were 10-20 years ago?

2) How much do parents know about what college demands and what it takes for a student to adapt to those demands? How much do they know about such bureaucratic procedures as registration, prerequisites, advisement, and degree requirements? What strategies might be recommended to improve parental understanding of the processes of higher education?

3) What roles do parents play in the basic decision to attend college? Has parental financial planning for higher education changed significantly in recent years?

4) Many American families move frequently and their children are likely to attend several high schools. What can parents of those families do to attain greater consistency in the preparation of their children for college?

THE TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: STUDENT ADAPTATION

The relatively high attrition rate in American colleges and universities suggests that some entering students have difficulty adapting to higher education and its demands. The task of adaptation is a significant one, and we expect to discuss a number of its components at the hearing, including the following:

1) What kinds of adjustment problems--academic, social, psychological--are most prevalent among entering college students in the traditional age group?

2) How do entering college freshmen establish academic and personal identity? What accounts for early choice of major? What effects does the early choice of major have on other aspects of student development?

3) What assumptions do high school seniors and college freshmen hold concerning the relationship between school and home environments? between school and leisure environments? between school and work environments? How do these assumptions change in the course of the freshman year? How do they influence academic achievement and motivation?

4) What do high school students think college-level "work" means? Do they equate work with academic chores such as tests and term papers? Do they equate it with a great deal of reading? What influence does their image of academic work have on the reality of their freshman year performance?

5) When students first register at college, do they find the economic transaction of paying for certain numbers of credits in certain courses a strange one? What do they think they "buy" at college registration? How does the initial registration experience affect their relationship to their education and to the community in which that education takes place?

6) It has often been observed that, regardless of test scores, the

principal barrier to learning faced by entering college students is vocabulary. Is there any way that the testing and admissions process can provide a more accurate reading on the extent of a student's vocabulary?

THE TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: CURRICULUM AND CAREERS

While the Commission will be exploring the relationship between high school and college curriculum in more detail on another occasion (i.e. a panel discussion in August at the University of Rhode Island), the problems of student preparation for college and enrollment mix as a criterion in admissions policies both suggest a number of important issues that are appropriate for this hearing. Among those issues expected to be addressed are the following:

1) Why do colleges continually create ever more narrow degree programs? How do high school students evaluate what it means to apply to a college with a degree program in Medical Records Administration or Energy Management, for example? Can high school students make decisions that are so fine-tuned in terms of courses of study? Or are such degree programs more appropriate for older students?

2) To what extent are students aware of the types of education and training that will later be offered to them (or required of them) by employers?

3) Both guidance counselors and major employers have told the Commission that "a good liberal education" is the most realistic and best training for a student's future work. In the face of that judgment, what accounts for the persistence of students in choosing narrow vocational courses of study in their later high school years and in pursuing those courses through college to the maximum extent that a college will allow? Is there a relationship between the number of credits one accumulates in a narrow field and employability?

4) It has been documented that undergraduate programs in business administration and related fields tend to attract students with relatively low academic skill levels. At the same time, these fields have grown in popularity for entering freshmen. The Commission has previously heard testimony from corporate managers that the communications and analytic skill levels of their entering employees are in serious need of upgrading, and that corporations spend a great deal of time and money in remedying such deficiencies. What can realistically be done to rectify this situation? Should undergraduate degree programs in business establish differential admissions standards? Should corporations articulate their expectations more clearly?

THE TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF ADVISEMENT

Given both the increased administrative demands on high school guidance counselors and the significant reductions in the numbers of those personnel in

comprehensive high schools, large numbers of students receive comparatively limited advisement with respect to college and vocational choices. Separate advisement and counseling staffs at the college level have also been affected by personnel cutbacks to the extent that in many colleges, a student's chances of receiving adequate academic advisement and personal counseling are wholly random. Recognizing these trends, the following issues are expected to be raised at the hearing:

1) At what point in students' high school programs do counselors now encourage students to think about their careers? What are the most productive roles that guidance counselors can play with respect to student's post-high school plans? What are the advantages and disadvantages of encouraging students to delay thinking about careers until they are in college?

2) What roles can teachers and other school administrators play in students' post-high school plans?

3) In seeking to explain persistence and retention in college, a number of researchers have claimed that the student who is less involved in the social and cultural activities of the institution is more likely to drop out. They have pointed out that for residential students in particular, informal contact with faculty and peers plays a pivotal role in student adjustment to college life. Given such considerations, where should a college advisement program place its emphasis? How should these emphases differ for commuter students? for adult students?

THE TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION: DIFFERENT APPROACHES

The Commission has requested a number of profiles of programs that seek to prepare students better for the transition from secondary to postsecondary education or that have experimented with the boundary between the two levels. While we have gathered descriptions of these noble efforts and experiments, evidence of their impact on student performance in college is highly variable, and, in some cases, very limited. We thus expect the following questions to be aired at the hearing:

1) Through such mechanisms as advanced placement, time-shortened degrees, and early colleges, a number of institutions have tried to condense the educational careers of many students. What is gained and lost by these strategies? Under what circumstances do they work?

2) Many colleges have established programs that bring high school students to campus on a regular basis for a combination of academic work, career exposure, and social activities. Others have sent college students and/or faculty to high schools on a regular basis for both academic and advisement purposes. Others have turned high school teachers into adjunct faculty and, through them, have offered college credit bearing courses to high school students. What are the virtues and limitations of moving students and/or teachers from one level

of education to another, particularly secondary and postsecondary? Is there any evidence to suggest that high school students understand college "work" any better? college environments any better?

3) Some colleges feel that the ideal time to assist students in adapting to the nature and demands of higher education is after matriculation, and through special programs that address both academic and personal development or through freshmen seminars that are geared as much toward mastery of learning resources and methods as they are to specific subject content. Others evidently place their emphasis on pre-matriculation programs involving orientation, counseling, advisement, or self-paced reading. Under what circumstances are these distinct strategies beneficial? for what kinds of students?

4) In addressing the needs of the underprepared students, colleges have generally employed separate remedial programs. But they are now trying such motivational approaches as trial admissions, non-additive credits for remedial courses, and early identification and competency-testing of high school students who are not performing to their full potential. Separately, many have developed programs directed more at high school teachers than high school students. Is there any evidence to suggest that any of these approaches is more more beneficial than others? for what kinds of students?

Contents of this Briefing Package

We have chosen to limit this package to those documents that will either be elaborated on by their authors at the hearing or that illuminate one of the primary topics under consideration. Copies of all the testimony will be handed out at the hearing.

If you do not have the time to read all of these documents before the hearing, please focus your attention on those marked with an asterisk.

*Clifford Sjogren, "College Admissions and the Transition to Postsecondary Education: Standards and Practices." This paper was commissioned for the hearing, and its author will be presenting testimony at the hearing.

*Alexander Astin, "The American Freshman, 1966-1981: Some Implications for Educational Policy and Practice." This paper was commissioned for the hearing.

*Fred Hargadon, "College Admissions and Testing," The American Psychologist, Vol. 36, no. 10, pp. 1111-1119. The author of this article will be presenting testimony at the hearing.

*"Background Statistics Bearing on Current and Projected College Enrollments and Enrollment Mix," documents selected by NIE staff.

*"Summary Report: Panel on Peformance Expectations in American Education,"

National Commission on Excellence in Education.

William C. Parrish, "State Mandated Graduation Requirements," Reston, Virginia: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1980.

American Association of Colleges, "Programs for First-Year Students," The Forum for Liberal Education, vol. IV, no. 2 (Nov./Dec., 1981).

Martin Trow, "Confronting the Challenge of Underprepared Students," unpublished paper presented to the 1982 Conference of AAHE.